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ABSTRACT

A speech communication department in an urban college should perform functions geared to the special requirements of urban students and their communities. In addition, departments can provide special services in three areas: business and industrial consulting on communication problems, biomedical communication to disseminate information on matters of public health, and government communication to assist the training of upgrading of city and county employees. A second paper presents in some detail a special business communication course developed for potential management trainees, all of them black, selected by a major manufacturing firm. In addition to classroom work, the course features assignments at the company's offices. A few of the assignments are provided as examples of the course goals. (RN)

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THE MISSION OF URBAN COMMUNICATION

By Michael Porte
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The department of speech communication has a unique mission in an urban settings. It should concern itself with five aspects, which should be integrated into a total program: (1) undergraduate, graduate, and non-credit teaching of rhetoric and public address, group and interpersonal communication and media communication; (2) research, both original and applied, that takes up the challenge of humanizing communication in an urban setting; (3) business and industrial consulting and teaching to help the business community solve its problems; (4) biomedical communication in the form of workshops, classes, and meetings in the various health environments, and (5) government communication to assist training directors in motivating and upgrading (Ed. note: performance and attitudes of?) city, county, state, and federal employees.

The first aspect, teaching, must be responsive to changing student needs and yet balanced enough to preserve and transmit the great ideas from the past. Our faculty has worked with students in activities such as debate, film societies, arts trips, court watching, providing help for dope addicts, recycling urban waste, and in organizing small discussion groups. Arrangements have been worked out so that students can receive academic credit while participating in such activities. The credit evolved out of student-faculty contracts where each member agrees in advance to instructional objectives and specific activities which meet the objectives.

Along with new courses in film, interpersonal and group communication, students have the option of understanding Plato, Aristotle, the Sophists, Roman orators, Elizabethan rhetoric, and political debates in Parliament and Congress. Skills courses exist in speaking, writing, discussing and listening. The content of these courses centers on the actual experiences of students in urban environments. Students who participate in co-operative education, which was founded at the University of Cincinnati in 1904, bring insights from their work experience into the classroom.

Research in urban communication often involves risk-taking since many of the problems involve real people in search of help right now. (Ed. note: Some scholars content that communication <u>is</u> risk-taking). The researcher cannot hide behind an exclusive concern with methodology or a safe retreat into the past. He must care about the individual in the city. He must bring his knowledge of the great humanist tradition to the immediate concerns of persons involved in vital communication within the city. Never before have so many been so debased and dehumanized in the name of progress. Often the mark of a successful man is how rapidly he takes his family out of the city and away from its problems. Yet, if the many positive resources of the great cities could be understood in terms of their advantages, many of the pressing national problems could better be resolved. It is the responsibility of the department of speech communication to be concerned with the quality of communication. Our major research interest is an ethical one, an interest in the highest form of expression an urban communicator is capable of thinking, planning, and sending. (Ed. note: Many believe we are on sounded ground talking about effectiveness expressed as achievable goals. By whose ethics do we proceed? By whose standards of expression do we judge "highest form" etc.?)

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How easy it is to lose oneself in general concepts, to think in terms of institutions, masses of people. How hard it is to focus on one man, one face, one problem. To humanize communication, you must individualize it. To solve the problems of the city, you must first be able to help one man, to listen to him, to empathize with him, and to respond in a meaningful way.

Business and industrial consulting is one of the best ways of keeping in touch with the problems of the city. This activity ranges from setting up individualized courses in communication for employees of a company,[1] to teaching communication in a business orientation program for black students the company is considering as future employees.[2] Lines of communication should be kept open with many companies and the local chamber of commerce. Often students can work on problems of immediate interest to the chamber rather than on exercises that never leave the classroom. When confronted with a real person, a student will be challenged to make a real response and to accept responsibility for it.

One of the major needs in each city is improved biomedical communication. A department of speech communication brings a point of view to such activities that is invaluable. Our contribution is not hardware but a concern for the individual, a humanistic perspective, an ethical commitment that does not stop with "how to do" but goes on to "how to be," an infinitive that each person must split for himself. In Cincinnati, our department has established formal ties with our medical school and the hospital settings. Our students and faculty work and study in those environments. We consider this opportunity not only as a chance to learn but as a way to serve. When a student prepares a television program, he knows that someone in a waiting room will see it. Successful short courses have been given in hospitals on such subjects as Communication and Listening, Presentation of Ideas, Conference Leadership and Participation.

Government communication has varied from classes held in City Hall to an evening class on campus in Communication and the Community where members of various social agencies and government departments met with members of the media, court officials, and the superintendent of our work house. What better activity than court watching can you plan for your students? It opens eyes to the way people present themselves, their cause, and how judges react, not to mention how the media report the proceedings.

Urban communication is one of the most challenging and exciting academic pursuits available to students in a metropolitan university. It forces a constant evaluation of what is best in traditional rhetoric and what is worthwhile in the newest trends in communication. Just as we must beware of embracing each fad because it is new, we should be careful not to revere each idea because it is old. It is important not to underestimate our greatest weapon--the balanced perspective of the educated humanist.

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[1] Journal of Communication, XVII, No. 3 (September, 1967), 250-254.

[2] American Business Communication Association Bulletin, XXXV, No. 2 (June, 1972), 18-22. See also Dale Adams, "An Evaluation of a Summer Business Orientation for Selected Black Business Majors" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1972).

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION IN A BUSINESS ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR BLACK STUDENTS

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Business communication is an important factor in management effectiveness at Proctor & Gamble. Thus, it became a major part of the course curriculum in the innovative Business Orientation Program at the University of Cincinnati.

During the summer of 1970, I taught a class of 16 black students whose communication attitudes and whose communication skills improved. During the summer of 1971, I taught a class of 20 black students who showed a similar change in attitudes and a more significant improvement in skills. I learned a lot from coming into contact with these talented college juniors, selected by a committee representing Proctor & Gamble and the University of Cincinnati's College of Community Services. The program was administered by the College of Community Services, in the tradition of co-operative education which was founded at the University of Cincinnati in 1906 by Herman Schneider, who alternated students between classroom and industry each week.[1]

Using this idea, Dean Lawrence Hawkins assisted by William Jones structured the eight-week program so that students at the end of their junior year could spend four weeks at Proctor & Gamble and four weeks on the campus in Procter Hall, a modern air-conditioned facility. Studies within the company had identified two subject areas in which new employees often experienced difficulty. These areas involved the broad fields of communication and mathematics. To put it another way, one of the world's best-managed corporations found that effectiveness in business communication is a key factor in performances in management positions. A number of company managers met with me to identify the most common communication situations on the job. These were built into the course. They included oral presentation of ideas, conferences, written reports, memos, thinking, problem solving, and proposals.

As a teacher, I anticipated two problems. One was that my students came from colleges throughout the country with different requirements in regard to business communication. Some of my students had had a course or even two courses in business communications. Others had no such background. Thus, not only the schools were different in background but each student was, too.

Another problem I faced was that of evaluating my performance to see whether what I was doing in the course was in some way improving their skills in communication. Since Procter & Gamble and the University were interested in having good evidence of improvement, I needed some objective ways of showing student change in communication attitudes and tasks.

The problems were solved in several ways. Each student was given a pre and post test in written usage and mechanics,[2] each student was given a pre and post survey of communication attitudes,[3] and each received the identical task of a letter of inquiry to his or her company sponsor at the beginning and end of the course. In addition, each student was videotaped giving the identical speech in the first week and the last week of the course. Also, each student was given the opportunity to play the game of Venture at the beginning and end of the course. The use of all of these circular methods tends to reinforce learnings, to bolster confidence, and to answer a common student complaint: "If only you had given me a second chance to show you what I have learned."

The cyclical law of learning reflects my concept of communication. I see communication as a cycle which is incomplete until the sender receives feedback from the receiver which shows the sender that his message has been understood in the way in which he intended it to be understood. Thus, when a teacher makes

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an attempt to change behavior of the student, he should allow the student to demonstrate how that behavior has been modified. Naturally, not all students choose to modify their behavior.

To take a closer look at this problem, I asked a doctoral student in educational psychology to make a study of my class. He wanted to determine what opinions were held by the students, with regard to big business in general and Procter & Gamble in particular. He administered a semantic differential at the start and end of the program. He also wanted to see whether a student's ideal concept of himself changed in relation to his real concept of himself. To determine that, he administered a Q-sort at the beginning and end of the program. This student, Dale Adams, is in the process of writing up his findings in his doctoral dissertation.

I do not want to give the impression, though, that all students did was to take tests. In fact, the company representatives were wary of any tests for their own sake. Thus, students were confronted with their scores as a learning experience.

They were given the responsibility of changing their score if they wanted to do so. During the first year of the program, the course was non-credit, non-graded. During the second year, students received college credit and grades, but they were told that the tests and surveys were not going to influence their grades. They each had specific tasks such as participation in the job application process, the sales process, and a group task in report writing, which clearly affected their grade averages.

In the job application process, each student was part of a team which gave themselves a company name, wrote out job descriptions, wrote an ad for prospective employees, received and evaluated letters of applications and data sheets, conducted job interviews using Procter & Gamble standards of hiring, and chose one employee for their job from those who applied. All of these steps were conducted in a fishbowl with the rest of the class observing.

The first week of class was devoted to the process of team formation, through the use of communication exercises and games. This process was extremely important because the students learned how they functioned as a member of the team. The team later was to motivate some of them to perform tasks together. One student who performed well in his contribution to a team project told the class: "I never would have done it without Janet goading me into doing my share, making me feel guilty about relaxing while the others were working so hard." At the conclusion of the team investigative report on an important civic problem, each team gave an oral report to the class as well as a written report. They were encouraged to use slides and other visuals and they did. One team borrowed two trays of slides from a community planner to dramatize the consequences of putting an expressway through a city. Another team, investigating the effect of the SST decision on local industry, brought representatives from General Electric into the classroom. One was a company executive who played a major role in securing the government contract for the SST engine. The other was a black employee who was among the employees who were laid off as a consequence of the decision. As a result of listening to each task report, each member of the class had to write a one page decision memo on what they would decide to do and why. As a result of this assignment, if any team did not provide enough challenge to the class, its topic was received but another topic was selected for the memo.

Since Procter & Gamble as a company depends upon marketing many products for consumer acceptance, each student was asked to pick one of the company's products and to make a study of it. Based on their studies, students gave oral and written sales presentations. Students questioned whether they had put their finger on the reasons why a certain product was different from its competition. They explored the whole range of advertising appeals, and they wrote a sales letter to a specific audience.

During the first summer, I found that students made little use of readings in the library. The course was taught without a text. In the second year, they were given two texts and told they could buy a third at the bookstore if they wanted to improve their grammar on their own time. Even with the books, the course was not book-oriented. No tests on the books were given, nor were any papers assigned based on the books. The books were useful reference tools to help them do their communication tasks.

The focus was on student learning. I lectured only once--on report writing during the first year--which prompted one student to respond on his course critique: "We spent too much time in this area." The lecture was thrown out the next year and a more interesting way of presenting the material was used. The students participated in game simulations, role-playing exercises, theatre games, group discussions, speeches, non-verbal communication, programmed learning with books and audiotapes, slides, films, video-tapes, and a variety of interviewing tasks in their teams.

One of the most successful hours occurred when students told each other how they came across as team members. This hour took place after their tasks together were finished and they realized that they were returning to their respective colleges, probably never to work together again.

Each summer, I was made to realize that I was not teaching a class of blacks but a class of individuals. No two of the students were alike. Each started from a different place in terms of courses taken, communication experiences, motivation, ambition, willingness to work hard. During the summer of 1970, a graduate student found that the class had more drive and ambition regardless of what they had to do to get ahead than a regular summer school class. This finding was based on three shared experiences the two classes had and their responses to three scales.

Common sense could have produced the same finding. After all, the students were carefully recruited, encouraged to learn from the total resources of the company, the university, and the community. I cared about them. I respected them. I knew they would do a good job. The ultimate aim of the program is to give students a realistic picture of what working for a big corporation in a large city is like. Any expectations generated from the program grow out of actual experience. Any disappointments also come from experience. Some of the students from the 1970 class went on to graduate school. Others found jobs in industry. One member of the 1971 class is now working for Procter & Gamble. There was no commitment by the company to hire and no strings binding the student to seek employment. They all returned to their campuses to complete their senior year. Those who are recruited, though, are more than likely to succeed. They will not be the ones to profit. Their participation makes the university, the community, and most of all the company a better place, a richer place in which to work and to live.

Notes and References

[1]Ralph W. Tyler, "Introduction," to James W. Wilson and Edward H. Lyons, Work-Study College Programs (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), pp. 1-2.

[2]Morris Philip Wolf and Bette Ann Stead, Easy Grammar: A Programmed Review (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1970), pp. ix-xiv, 119-124.

[3]Peter Marlan Hackbert, "An Experiment in Training Communication--The Attitude-Performance Interface" (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1970).